

Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of Content

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The question of content externalism's compatibility with a plausible account of self-knowledge has been the subject of much debate in recent years. If the very content of my thoughts depends on external factors beyond me, factors that can only be known a posteriori, what happens to the traditional assumption that we know our own thoughts directly, without having to rely on any empirical investigations of the environment?

Nearly two decades ago, Tyler Burge presented what has become the standard compatibilist reply to this challenge.¹ Burge focused on a certain class of judgments, what he calls 'basic self-knowledge', such as *I think (with this very thought) that water is wet*. Exploiting the fact that reflexive judgments of this sort reemploy the content of the first-order thought, such that no 'content mistakes' are possible, Burge argued that externalism is perfectly compatible with the traditional view that we know our own thoughts directly and authoritatively. Ever since, compatibilists and incompatibilists have fought a *battle royale* over whether Burge's reply is satisfactory.² Compatibilists have relied on the fact that the reflexive judgments, or 'cogito-judgments', are self-verifying, whereas incompatibilists have tried to show that even if no content mistakes are possible, externalism implies that there is a sense in which the subject does not know the content of her thought.

In the paper I argue that this debate is fundamentally misconceived, since it is based on the problematic notion of 'knowledge of content'. I shall be making three claims. The first is that there are reasons to question the fruitfulness of the current debate concerning the compatibility of externalism and basic self-knowledge.

Although compatibilists are right to insist that content externalism cannot threaten the knowledge we have of our own occurrent thoughts, incompatibilists are equally right

to suggest that this reply fails to address the real problem. The incompatibilists are mistaken, however, in assuming that the real problem is epistemological. My second claim is that the proper question to ask is whether externalism can provide a plausible account of *understanding* or *concept grasp*. Grasping a concept or a content is sometimes characterized in terms of 'knowledge of content'; but, I argue, such 'knowledge' cannot be construed as a form of propositional knowledge, on pain of a regress. My final claim is that externalists have notorious difficulties giving a plausible account of understanding. This, I argue, is a direct result of the fact that externalism depends on the assumption that individuals have an incomplete grasp of the concepts that go into their own thoughts.³ According to the content externalist one can be in a position to knowingly self-ascribe a thought that one does not *understand*. This, I propose, identifies the real source behind the incompatibilist's intuition that appealing to the self-verifying nature of the cogito-thoughts is unsatisfactory.

Over the years, 'externalism' (or, sometimes, 'anti-individualism') has come to denote a variety of theses. This is unfortunate since it has led people to neglect some important distinctions. Here I wish to stress one such important distinction: That between externalism construed as a thesis within foundational semantics, as a thesis about the *determination* of content and meaning, and externalism construed as a semantic theory, a theory concerning the *semantic value* of a term (or a concept).⁴ Most commonly, externalism is understood in the first way, as providing an answer to what determines the meaning of my words and the content of my thoughts. And what is distinctive about foundational externalism, of course, is the claim that the determination basis includes external facts (such as facts about the individual's social or physical environment), and not just internal ones (such as brain states).⁵ This is the type of externalism that Burge defends and that figures in the discussion concerning

(Burgean) basic self-knowledge. It is also the type of externalism that is the focus of this paper. Externalism construed as a semantic theory, by contrast, tells us what the semantic value of a term (concept) is, not what that term (concept) has that semantic value in virtue of. A prime example is the Millian theory according to which the semantic value of a name is exhausted by its referent and hence is 'object-dependent'.⁶ This second form of externalism underlies another debate concerning self-knowledge, triggered by the so-called *reductio* argument provided by Michael McKinsey, according to which the compatibilist position reduces to absurdity since it implies that we can know certain things a priori that, intuitively, do not seem to be knowable in that way.⁷ In this paper, I shall leave that debate be, as well as the controversial question of whether one can endorse foundational externalism without endorsing object-dependence. Even without the assumption of object-dependence, I argue, foundational externalism is in trouble.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first sets the stage by rehearsing Burge's account of basic self-knowledge and his reply to the so-called 'switching argument'. In the second section I examine the debate over Burge's account of basic self-knowledge. The third section discusses the notion of 'knowledge of content', and argues that we should reject the idea that we stand in a cognitive relation to the content of our own thoughts. In the fourth section I turn to what I take to be the real problem underlying the current debate concerning basic self-knowledge and externalism: the externalist commitment to the assumption of incomplete understanding and the problematic implications this assumption has when it comes to giving an account of the individual's reasoning.

1. The switching argument and Burge's reply

In "Individualism and self-Knowledge" Burge sets himself the task of explaining how basic self-knowledge is possible, given that thought content is individuated by the external environment.⁸ To illustrate the difficulty posed, Burge imagines an individual who is switched back and forth between his original situation and a twin situation (albeit slowly enough for the content of his thoughts to change), without being able to tell that any switch has taken place. For instance, the individual is switched to Twin Earth, and, as a result, his water-thoughts are switched to twater-thoughts, even though he is not aware that he has been switched. Does it follow that in order to know his own thoughts he has to undertake an empirical investigation of his environment? Burge famously denies that content externalism has this implication. To think that water is a liquid, he argues, certain empirical (causal) conditions have to hold, but one need not *know* that these conditions obtain – it is enough that they do in fact obtain. If they do, then knowing that one is thinking that water is a liquid merely requires thinking the reflexive thought *I am thinking that water is a liquid*.⁹ Since the reflexive thought inherits the content of the first-order thought, no mistake is possible. On Earth Oscar thinks that he is thinking that water is a liquid, and after the switch he thinks that he is thinking that twater is a liquid.

Thinking the reflexive thought, according to Burge, therefore suffices for basic self-knowledge. Of course, in order to think the reflexive thought *I am thinking that water is a liquid* I must understand the thought in question. However, Burge argues, having such understanding does not require an ability to *explicate* one's thoughts. Conceptual explication, Burge stresses, involves conceptual skills and a mastery of the conditions that underlie one's thoughts, that go beyond what is required for basic self-knowledge: "One should not assimilate 'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the

sense of basic self-knowledge, to 'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of being able to explicate them correctly – being able to delineate their constitutive relations to other thoughts."¹⁰

In a follow-up paper, "Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge", Burge develops this idea.¹¹ To self-ascribe a thought, Burge argues, one has to *understand* it. It therefore cannot be the case that one can self-ascribe a thought without having any grasp of what one is referring to. However, he emphasizes, "one need not have any more explicatory understanding of one's thoughts than is necessary to think them".¹² The justification, or entitlement of cogito-judgments, he suggests, does not derive from the fact that we know a lot about our thoughts, but has two other sources.¹³ The first is the constitutive relation between these judgments and their subject matter. That is, on Burge's view, the self-verifying nature of these judgments also serves to justify them - they are, as it were, self-justifying. The second source, according to Burge, is the role these judgments play in critical reasoning. Critical reasoning involves an ability to assess one's reasons as reasons, an ability to check, weigh and supplement one's reasons. However, in order to make such assessments and revisions, one has to grasp the rational relations among one's thoughts. Critical reasoning, Burge argues, "requires a second-order ability to think about thought contents or propositions, and rational relations among them..."¹⁴ Since judgments about one's own thoughts play a central role in our critical reasoning, Burge suggests, we must be *entitled* to these judgments, they must constitute knowledge: "one must have an epistemic right to those beliefs or judgments."¹⁵

In order to answer the concern that content externalism is in conflict with self-knowledge, therefore, Burge draws a 'minimalist' picture of self-knowledge: Knowing that one is thinking that p does not require knowing a lot about the thought

that *p*, or its individuation conditions, but merely that one understands *p*. Reflexive judgments about the content of an occurrent thought are self-verifying, and derive their epistemic status not from any kind of evidence, but from their self-justifying nature and from their role in critical reasoning. Possible switching scenarios do therefore not pose a threat to basic self-knowledge.

2. Cogito-thoughts and self-knowledge

It is difficult to dispute Burge's claim that cogito-judgments are self-verifying: Since the thought that the judgment is about is contained in the judgment itself there is no possibility of a mistake. Cogito-judgments are therefore fundamentally different from ordinary second-order judgments, such as 'I believe that *p*'. The latter judgment, obviously, is not self-verifying, since what the judgment is about (the first-order belief) is independent of the judgment.¹⁶ If cogito-judgments do not suffice for self-knowledge it must be for some other reason.

One possibility is to challenge Burge's denial that knowing one's thoughts requires knowing their individuation conditions. Oscar does not know what he is thinking when he thinks *Water is wet*, it might be argued, since he does not know anything about the external conditions that individuate this thought. However, few incompatibilists have tried this route. This is so for good reason. In general, knowing one's own mental events does not require knowing anything about their individuation conditions. Indeed, in the case of mental content it is clear that a regress threatens if it is assumed that knowing one's own thoughts requires knowing their individuation conditions. Knowing these conditions, presumably, would require knowing a further thought which would require knowing *its* individuation conditions, etc.¹⁷

A more *prima facie* promising incompatibilist strategy is to argue that what is missing from Burge's account of self-knowledge is a certain discriminatory ability, what is sometimes called 'introspective knowledge of comparative content': knowledge of whether or not two mental events have the same content.¹⁸ This comparative knowledge is arguably threatened by an externalist account of thought content. For instance, Oscar, after the switch, will not be able to tell whether he is thinking water-thoughts or twater-thoughts introspectively, but would need to undertake an empirical investigation of the nature of the stuff called 'water' in his environment.¹⁹ As Jessica Brown puts it, content externalism undermines the thesis that difference of content is *transparent*; the thesis that if two thoughts have a different content (*Water is wet* and *Twater is wet*) the individual will be able to realize this a priori.²⁰ This failure of transparency, incompatibilists have suggested, shows that the individual does not know the content of his first-order thought, despite the self-verifying nature of the reflexive thought.

The question is how to motivate the claim that having this comparative knowledge is a requirement on introspective knowledge. Why, the compatibilist asks, should Oscar have to be able to distinguish water-thoughts from twater-thoughts introspectively, in order to know that he is thinking that water is wet?²¹ Is it not enough that he thinks the thought, and self-ascribes it in Burge's way? To make her case, the compatibilist suggests an analogy with perceptual knowledge.²² To know that I see an apple in front of me, it is argued, I need not be able to discriminate the perceived object from every possible counterfeit. I need only have the capacity to distinguish the object from relevant alternatives. Similarly, to know that I am thinking that water is wet, I need not be able to rule out all possible alternative thoughts I would have had, had I been transported to an alternative environment.²³

The incompatibilist responds by pushing the parallel with perception and arguing that in certain situations, the alternative thought in question *will* be a relevant alternative. For instance, imagine that Twin Earth really does exist, and that S, without being aware of it, undergoes a series of switches between Earth and Twin Earth.²⁴ S would then be in a situation that would make it reasonable to require that he could distinguish water-thoughts from twater-thoughts, and this he could not do. The compatibilist, in response, is quick to point out that luckily we are not in the situation of S, and the mere possibility that one might be in that situation does nothing to threaten the knowledge we actually have of our own thoughts.²⁵ The incompatibilist in turn, replies by suggesting that in fact, right here on Earth, switching cases are prevalent as we, unknowingly, move from one linguistic community to another.²⁶

It is not my intention to determine the outcome of this part of the debate. However, it should be pointed out that the incompatibilist faces a serious difficulty in pushing this line: The lack of comparative knowledge has no bearing on the truth of the cogito-judgments. This difficulty derives from the fact that the suggested parallel with the case of perceptual knowledge does not hold up since perceptual judgments, unlike cogito-judgments, can be mistaken. The point about excluding relevant alternatives seems apt and coherent when it comes to perceptual knowledge. If there were a lot of fake apples around, my perceptual judgment ‘That’s an apple’ could not qualify as knowledge unless I had some ability to discriminate the fake apples from the real ones – otherwise it would be sheer luck if my judgment were true. However, it should be clear that this reasoning cannot be applied when it comes to basic self-knowledge, since in this case there is not, as Burge emphasizes, the possibility of being wrong. Even when Oscar is shuttled back and forth between Earth and Twin Earth his cogito-judgments will be true. Thus, in the cogito-case it cannot be held that

the lack of comparative knowledge undermines the individual's reliability.²⁷ How, then, can the incompatibilist motivate the claim that this lack poses a threat to the epistemic status of the cogito-judgments?

Jessica Brown, in a recent discussion, draws attention to the fact that in the case of cogito-judgments reliability and discriminative ability come apart. She suggests that this shows that people have failed to distinguish two possible types of account of knowledge, "one based on the notion of a reliable belief-forming process, the other on the notion of a discriminative ability."²⁸ Whether the compatibilist reply is satisfactory, she argues, therefore depends on whether there are cases where reliability alone, without a corresponding discriminative ability, suffices for knowledge.

Brown may be right in her claim that we need to pay attention to the distinction between reliabilist accounts of knowledge and accounts based on the notion of discriminatory abilities. However, the discrepancy between cogito-judgments and perceptual judgments throws doubt on the suggestion that the epistemic status of cogito-judgments depends on unresolved issues concerning the relationship between reliability and knowledge. The 'reliability' of such judgments, after all, is the upshot of their self-verifying form, rather than of their being the result of a particularly reliable belief-forming process, as in the perceptual case. In this respect, cogito-judgments are less like perceptual judgments and more like judgments of the form 'I am here'. They are, as it were, a trivial or limiting case of knowledge, and it is implausible to propose that we do not know anything about their epistemic status until we have settled controversial epistemological issues.²⁹

There are therefore reasons to question the fruitfulness of the debate over Burgean basic self-knowledge. As long as the debate is phrased in terms of

knowledge the compatibilist has a reply readily available to the incompatibilist ('cogito-judgments cannot be mistaken!'). At the same time, there is the widely shared intuition that there is something unsatisfactory about this reply - and yet no further epistemological reflections seem to give any guidance. My proposal is that we must switch gears: The conclusion to be drawn is not that more epistemological work needs to be done, but that the real issue here is not epistemological.

3. Knowledge of content

Let us begin by distinguishing three distinct notions of 'knowledge of content' that figure in the debate:

1. *Grasp of content.*
2. *Knowledge of the content of a particular thought event.*
3. *Knowledge of the content of a particular utterance.*

First, there is the very basic notion of 'knowledge of content', where what is 'known' is the abstract object, a concept or a content. This notion of knowledge of content is basic in that unless I 'know' the concept of *water* in this sense, I cannot have any water-thoughts at all, much less know that I do. However, it should be clear that for this very reason the notion of 'knowledge' in this context is misleading. Knowing a concept or a content, in this sense, cannot be said to be a form of propositional knowledge, since all such knowledge presupposes having certain concepts in the first place. Put slightly differently: For there to be propositional knowledge, we need a mental representation of the concept in question, and thus the relation between this mental representation and the abstract object cannot itself be construed as a form of such knowledge, on pain of regress.³⁰ How, then, should the relation be understood? The traditional idea is that we 'grasp' a concept, or 'possess'

it. The metaphor of ‘grasping’ is not entirely clear of course. However, it can be given a very low-profile construal simply by saying that S stands in the relation of grasping or possessing the concept C, if some facts about S (and her environment, if one likes) make it true that S is to be ascribed C. Construed this way, the notion of grasping is neutral as between the internalists and the externalists. The important point is simply that grasping C should not be understood as standing in a cognitive relation to C.³¹

Once one has grasped a concept, of course, one may come to have a form of meta-level knowledge about this concept and hence be said to stand in a cognitive relation to it. For instance, one may be able to provide explications of the concept in question. However, this kind of knowledge is not a prerequisite for having the concept in the first place since it is a capacity that is parasitic on the basic capacity of grasping a concept. Moreover, it is a capacity that requires a level of cognitive sophistication that the individual may not acquire until much later (if at all) in her development (just as Burge stresses).

This first notion of ‘knowledge of content’ is to be distinguished from a second notion, the notion that is typically employed in the current debate: Knowledge of the content of a particular thought token. For instance, the question is asked whether Oscar, in the switching scenario, knows the content of his thought *Water is wet*. It should be clear, however, that ‘knowing the content’ of one’s thought in this sense amounts to nothing more than knowing that one is thinking that water is wet. That is, one knows that a certain thought episode is taking place in the sense that one thinks it reflexively. Although basic self-knowledge is clearly a form of propositional knowledge, it is therefore potentially misleading to speak of knowledge of *content* here. Of course, to self-ascribe the thought in question, Oscar must have grasped the relevant concepts. However, again, grasping a concept cannot itself be construed as a

form of propositional knowledge, and should be sharply distinguished from the knowledge one has when one self-ascribes an occurrent thought.

Third, there is the notion of ‘knowledge of content’ as applied to a particular use of language. For instance, if I utter ‘Es regnet’ you may not know the content of my expression. Similarly, the question may arise whether I know the content of my own utterances. This is a rather innocuous use of the notion of ‘knowledge of content’, and less misleading than in the case of thoughts since it is one thing to know that certain words were uttered, another to know what was said (even in the first person case). However, here too, caution is called for since describing the knowledge one has when one knows what is said as a ‘knowledge of content’ may give the impression that knowing what is said requires having some form of meta-linguistic belief (for instance, a belief about the truth-conditions of one’s utterance). This is problematic, since, arguably, I may know what I say without having any such beliefs (I may not have the required semantic concepts). How this notion of ‘knowledge of content’ is to be spelled out, therefore, depends on what one takes to be involved in knowing a language, and whether one is inclined to give a cognitivist construal of semantic theories.³²

Equipped with these distinctions, let us return to the debate concerning externalism and self-knowledge. The main focus of the self-knowledge debate, again, is the second notion of ‘knowledge of content’. However, as suggested above, in this sense ‘knowledge of content’ amounts to nothing more than reflective awareness of a particular thought event. This explains why it is so difficult to find anything epistemically objectionable with Burge’s cogito-judgments: If ‘knowledge of content’ is understood in the second sense Burge’s reply seems beyond reproach. For instance, the lack of comparative knowledge of content does not seem detrimental if this is the

notion of ‘knowledge of content’ that one is concerned with - just as the compatibilist argues.

The third notion of ‘knowledge of content’ is more plausibly in tension with content externalism, depending on how one construes the switching scenario. There is no difficulty if it is assumed that a switch in meaning goes hand in hand with a switch in thought-content. Oscar’s beliefs about what he said when uttering ‘Water is wet’ will then be in harmony with what he actually said. Things get a bit more complicated if it is assumed that Oscar retains the old concept, and thus is equipped with both the concept of *water* and the concept of *twater*. As Sanford Goldberg has suggested, we can imagine a situation in which Oscar knows that he is in a switching scenario, but does not know which planet he is on.³³ On the assumption that Oscar, in this situation, has both the concept of *water* and the concept of *twater*, it seems as if Oscar does not know what he said when uttering ‘Water is wet’. To know that, Oscar would first have to know whether he is on Earth or Twin Earth. This is so, Goldberg points out, even if we assume that Oscar has a complete grasp of both concepts and is perfectly able to explicate their difference: He would still need empirical information in order to determine which thought is being expressed by the particular utterance.

It is therefore possible that a case can be made for the incompatibility of content externalism and knowledge of content in the third sense. If so, it follows that our first-person authority of the semantic content of our expressions is threatened by content externalism. However, the compatibilist may not feel terribly threatened by this. First, the threat only arises in a situation in which Oscar has both of the concepts in question, and, moreover, *knows* that he is in a switching scenario, although not where he is at the moment. This, it might be argued, is an even more outlandish scenario than the standard switching-scenario, and its possibility does nothing to

undermine the authority we ordinarily have with respect to the semantic content of our utterances.³⁴ Second, it is not obvious that this conclusion concerning first-person knowledge of semantic content has any bearing on knowledge of our own *thoughts*. It seems open to the compatibilist to hold that although content externalism poses a threat to first-person authority when it comes to utterance content, no threat is posed at the level of thought, given the self-verifying nature of cogito-judgments.³⁵ That is, the compatibilist may claim that although Oscar does not know whether ‘Water is wet’ expresses the content *Water is wet* or *Twater is wet*, he does know what he is thinking when he thinks *Water is wet* (or when he thinks *Twater is wet*).

If this is right, then content externalism does not pose a threat to ‘knowledge of content’ in the second sense, and although it may pose a threat to ‘knowledge of content’ in the third sense, this does not have any obviously damaging implications for knowledge of our own thoughts. What about ‘knowledge of content’ in the first sense? My suggestion is that this is where the real issue lies. However, precisely because this first notion of ‘knowledge of content’ is not an epistemic notion, the real issue here is not an epistemic one.

4. Incomplete understanding

4.1 Content externalism and the assumption of incomplete understanding

Burge’s account of what he calls basic self-knowledge, as noted above, is very minimalist: Knowing that one is thinking that *p* merely requires thinking *p* reflexively. He notes that self-ascription presupposes understanding the thought well enough to think it, but stresses that one’s understanding may be rather incomplete. One can know what one’s thoughts are, Burge writes, “even while one understands one’s thoughts partially, in the sense that one gives incomplete or mistaken

explications of one's thoughts or concepts."³⁶ Burge's account of basic self-knowledge therefore involves two separate claims. First, that knowing that one is thinking that *p* merely requires thinking *p* reflexively, self-ascribing it. Second, that one may think that *p* although one has an incomplete understanding of *p*.³⁷ The debate concerning externalism and self-knowledge, again, has focused on the first step, the claim that the reflexive judgment suffices for knowledge of one's own thoughts. Thus, as we have seen, various efforts have been made to challenge Burge's claim that thinking *p* reflexively suffices for knowing that one is thinking that *p*. Meanwhile, the second step has gone unnoticed in this debate.³⁸ However, as we shall see, the second step is the crucial one.

The assumption of incomplete understanding is essential to Burge and to content externalism generally.³⁹ Burge is quite explicit about this in his original thought experiment concerning the concept of *arthritis*. He emphasizes that the experiment presupposes that the individual, Bert, uttering "I have arthritis in my thigh", has an incomplete understanding of the concept of arthritis. Bert fails to grasp that in his community it is a definitional, or conceptual, truth that 'arthritis' applies only to ailments of the joints.⁴⁰ When, therefore, he utters 'I have arthritis in my thigh', he does not make an empirical error, but a conceptual one: He betrays conceptual confusion. Nonetheless, Burge argues, since Bert relies on his community practice, he is to be ascribed the standard concept of arthritis, and said to have thoughts containing this concept. Thus, the thought experiment presupposes the idea that an individual can think a thought containing a concept that he or she understands incompletely.⁴¹ For simplicity, let us dub this thesis ICU:

(ICU) S may think thoughts containing concept C, despite the fact that S has an incomplete grasp of C.

It is important to be clear what the relevant notion of 'incomplete grasp' is in this context. Burge, as we have seen above, tends to characterize incomplete understanding in terms of the inability to explicate one's own concepts. However, this fails to capture what is distinctive about the externalist notion of incomplete understanding. After all, the internalist too can grant that one may think with a concept without being able to explicate it. The ability to explicate a concept, as stressed above, is a meta-level ability, and an individual may apply a concept competently, without necessarily having this ability. Indeed, this is precisely what one should expect given that the explicational abilities are secondary to grasping a concept. Surveying one's usage of a concept is a very complex, and cognitively demanding, task: proposed explications are revised as one thinks of counter-examples and there is no guarantee that the proposed explication is correct. This is something that internalists and externalists alike should grant.⁴²

The notion of incomplete understanding that the externalist is committed to, therefore, goes beyond this. The externalist does not merely claim that it is difficult to explicate a concept and that we may get confused while trying to do so, but also that our actual employment of concepts is such that, even assuming perfect rationality, *we are mistaken in this employment*. Bert is not merely unable to provide a proper explication of the concept of *arthritis*, he applies the concept in a way that is incompatible with the concept, rendering his judgments conceptually false (he believes he has a disease of the joints only in his thigh). Indeed, even if Bert could survey his own use perfectly he would fail to realize that arthritis is a disease of the joints only. The proviso concerning perfect rationality is important. Internalists will grant that on occasion individuals are confused and make conceptual errors.⁴³ However, the externalist provides for a further source of conceptual error that is quite

independent of the rationality of the individual. The content externalist, that is, is committed to a form of incomplete understanding that implies that our thoughts stand in conceptual and rational relations that no amount of rational reflection can reveal to us – not because it is difficult to survey one's own use, but because one's own use does not determine which concept one employs. On this view, someone who is completely rational and who even has a perfect insight into her own use of concept C, would still come up with mistaken explications, precisely because her use is the result of an incomplete grasp of C.

The type of incomplete understanding that the externalist is committed to, therefore, is distinctive of externalism. It is a direct result of the foundational externalist claim that external factors determine thought content in a way that is not sensitive to the role the thought in question plays in the individual's cognitive life. This, in turn, leads to difficulties accounting for the individual's reasoning, her perspective. What is threatened by externalism is not self-knowledge but the widely shared idea that concepts serve to capture the individual's cognitive perspective.

4.2 Incomplete understanding and reasoning

That content externalism opens up a problematic gap between concepts and cognitive role is not, of course, a new problem. On the contrary, the charge that externalism is unable to account for the individual's cognitive perspective was leveled against externalism at its conception.⁴⁴ For instance, it was noted, externalism forces us to attribute different concepts where, intuitively, there is a sameness of cognitive role (Oscar and Toscar) and it forces us to attribute concepts that appear to jar with the individual's way of reasoning: That the individual reasons as though she has concept C1 (*tharthritis*, say) is overridden by the fact that the external environment (whether

social or physical) determines that she has concept C2 (*arthritis*) instead. Although the problem is not new, for a long time it receded into the background and the debate focused on whether content externalism is compatible with traditional conceptions of self-knowledge. If I am right, however, the issue of self-knowledge is mainly a distraction, leaving the real worry concerning content externalism untouched.

Consider the incompatibilist worry that externalism undermines ‘introspective knowledge of comparative content’ or simply, transparency of content. As we have seen above, it is very difficult to motivate the claim that a lack of comparative content threatens self-knowledge. It is quite clear, however, that such a lack poses serious difficulties when it comes to accounting for the individual's reasoning. That is, the problem is not that *self-knowledge* is undermined because the individual does not know whether thought T1 and thought T2 are distinct, but that the individual *reasons* as though they are not distinct when they are, and as though they are distinct when they are not. Thus, as Brown emphasizes, externalism implies that the individual may reason as if two thoughts contain the same concept when they do not (Oscar reasons as if *Aluminum is mined in Australia* and *Twaluminum is mined in the Soviet Union* contain the same concept), thereby drawing some obviously invalid inferences.⁴⁵ And it implies that the individual may reason as if two thoughts contain different concepts when they do not (Rudolf reasons as if *Cilantro is used in Mexican cooking* and *Coriander is used in Mexican cooking* are distinct thoughts), thereby failing to draw some obviously valid inferences as well as failing to notice inconsistencies.⁴⁶

Moreover, the assumption of incomplete understanding does not merely imply that apparently rational individuals are to be ascribed blatant reasoning errors and irrationalities, but also that the ability to critically *evaluate* their reasoning is threatened. As Burge himself stresses, critical reasoning is essential to our cognitive

life in so far as it allows us to check our reasons as reasons, to assess their inferential connections and weigh them against one another. Critical reasoning, he argues, presupposes that one is able to “assess truth, falsity, evidential support, entailment, and non-entailment among *propositions* or *thought-content*.”⁴⁷ However, ironically, the thesis of incomplete understanding threatens this capacity since it implies that our thoughts may stand in all sorts of rational connections that no amount of reflection could reveal.

This is nicely illustrated by Brown in an earlier paper on Burge.⁴⁸ If a subject is to be able to critically evaluate her own reasoning, Brown argues, she must be able to see the relations of reasons that hold among her propositional attitudes. However, she continues, the assumption of incomplete understanding is in tension with this requirement. To illustrate this, Brown uses Burge’s example of the individual who thinks that all contracts are written agreements, even though contracts, by definition, include oral agreements. If this individual believes that she has made a verbal agreement to provide catering for a wedding, and believes that she has failed to provide the catering, her beliefs give her reason to conclude that she has broken a contract. But the individual will fail to draw this conclusion. The individual’s incomplete understanding, Brown writes, will “prevent her from perceiving the relations of reason that in fact obtain between her attitudes; it would undermine her abilities as a critical reasoner.”⁴⁹

Burge, again, attempts to use the fact that we are critical reasoners as a form of Kantian argument in favor of compatibilism: Since we are critical reasoners, he argues, we must know the content of our own thoughts. Consequently, we are entitled to judgments about our own thoughts. However, this fails to address the prior question whether, indeed, content externalism is compatible with our ability as critical

reasoners. If content externalism poses a threat to this ability, because of its commitment to ICU, a rather different conclusion follows: Since we are critical reasoners content externalism is false.

My proposal, therefore, is that the real challenge posed to externalism concerns not self-knowledge, but understanding or concept grasp. Goldberg, in a recent paper, has suggested that we distinguish between two notions of ‘knowing one’s own thought’: one insubstantial, captured by Burge’s cogito-judgments, and one more substantial which involves having the relevant conceptual-explicational knowledge, what Goldberg calls ‘C-self-knowledge’. Equipped with this distinction, Goldberg suggests, it is possible to identify the core intuition behind incompatibilist arguments: “the intuition that being in a position to *knowingly* self-ascribe a thought is consistent with not knowing the thought self-ascribed.”⁵⁰ What the incompatibilist correctly intuits is that one may know one’s thought in the insubstantial sense, without thereby having C-self-knowledge. However, Goldberg argues, the fact that externalism poses a threat to C-self-knowledge does not show that it poses a threat to basic self-knowledge. Distinguishing between these two notions of self-knowledge therefore allows the compatibilist to meet the incompatibilist intuition head-on.

According to Goldberg, thus, the incompatibilist concern can be dismissed as based on a simple conflation between two types of self-knowledge. However, this is not a compelling suggestion. As argued above, that individuals fail to have conceptual-explicational knowledge of this sort is not distinctive of externalism but should be allowed for by any theory of content. Moreover, it is far from clear why anybody would consider such a failure to pose a threat to any type of *self-knowledge*. If we are to make sense of the incompatibilist worry, instead, we have to turn to the issue of understanding, as suggested above. To paraphrase Goldberg: content

externalism implies that one may be in a position to knowingly self-ascribe a thought that one does not *understand*. This, I submit, is the reason incompatibilists have (rightly) been wary of Burge's appeal to basic self-knowledge, although they have mistakenly put their worry in epistemological terms. To meet the incompatibilist intuition 'head-on', therefore, the compatibilist has to do more than simply appeal to Goldberg's distinction between two kinds of self-knowledge. Instead, the thesis of incomplete understanding has to be addressed together with its problematic implications for reasoning.

One response on behalf of the externalist, of course, is simply to reject the requirement that theories of content should allow us to make sense of the individual's point of view.⁵¹ If this is one's position, then the fact that externalism fails to account for the individual's reasoning and actions will not count as an objection. Whether such a move is plausible would be the topic for another discussion. It should be noted, however, that the compatibilists do not belong to this group. On the contrary, compatibilists typically endorse the requirement that concepts should serve to capture the individual's point of view and have attempted to defuse the threat posed by externalism in this regard.⁵² Let us consider two such attempts, one by Burge and one by Brown.

Burge is quite aware that content externalism appears to be in tension with the idea that content attributions should respect the assumption that individuals are by and large rational. How, he asks, can a rational person, believe that she has a disease of the joints only in her thigh? Burge suggests that the content externalist has a reply readily available: The apparent irrationalities can be explained away by appealing to the notion of *linguistic misinformation*. Considering the objection that charitable interpretation requires that we do not attribute beliefs of this sort to a rational person

he responds that this is not a good argument, since "there is nothing irrational or stupid about the linguistic or conceptual errors we attribute to our subjects. The errors are perfectly understandable as results of linguistic misinformation".⁵³ However, it should be clear that this proposal does not address the real problem here. That Bert misunderstands the meaning of the word 'arthritis' may explain why he uses the word in such an odd way (uttering 'I have arthritis in my thigh', for instance), but it does not explain how he can hold the *belief* that he has arthritis in his thigh (as Burge claims that Bert does). To explain this, Burge would have to add that because of the linguistic misinformation, there is a gap between meaning and content, such that Bert cannot be said to literally believe what he says. But this, of course, implies that Bert is *not* to be ascribed the community concept.⁵⁴ In short, the appeal to linguistic misinformation only helps if one rejects content externalism.

Brown has proposed an alternative strategy. She has recently argued that the tension between content externalism and the individual's reasoning is less threatening than it might appear, once we adopt a proper conception of rationality.⁵⁵ Following a suggestion by Boghossian, she introduces the notion of 'B-rational': Being B-rational is a matter of being able to grasp the logical properties of one's thoughts on an a priori basis.⁵⁶ This conception of rationality is incompatible with externalism, Boghossian argues, since externalism undermines the 'transparency of content', the idea that sameness and difference of content is transparent to the individual. Brown grants that (at least some forms of) externalism undermines transparency of content, but suggests that this merely shows that we should reject the assumption that ordinary subjects are B-rational. Instead, she argues, we should distinguish two abilities: "the ability to grasp a priori that thoughts specified as having a certain form have certain logical properties, and the ability to grasp a priori what form one's thoughts are".⁵⁷ Thus, she

argues, an individual may grasp a priori the validity of a certain argument form, such as modus ponens, but may need empirical information to grasp that certain of her thoughts instantiate this form and constitute a valid inference. Moreover, Brown argues, there are further reasons to deny that ordinary agents are B-rational, since there is much psychological evidence that subjects do not always conform their thoughts to the laws of logic a priori. Hence, Brown concludes, “it can hardly be an objection to anti-individualism that ordinary subjects are not B-rational”.⁵⁸

But Brown’s suggestion that the difficulties concerning externalism and reasoning can be resolved once the two notions of rationality are distinguished is not convincing. Although the distinction is unobjectionable in itself, it is quite clear that the weaker notion of rationality is not what matters when it comes to making sense of individuals. That is, what matters is not merely that the individual grasps the validity of certain argument forms, but also that she grasps that her actual thoughts stand in certain rational connections (and, it should be pointed out, not merely logical ones) with one another. For instance, the weak notion of rationality is obviously of no use in explaining and predicting actions, since it is our actual beliefs and desires that play a role in action explanation.

Brown notices that we need the stronger notion of rationality for these purposes. Even if subjects are not B-rational, she says, we still need a conception of rationality if we are to assess reasoning as rational and predict and explain actions. However, she argues further, this is compatible with content externalism, since even if there are counterexamples to transparency, we will still be able, by and large, to use the relevant psychological principles to predict and explain action.⁵⁹ Thus, she suggests, content externalism poses no greater a threat to these principles than does the fact that individuals, on occasion, make certain errors of reasoning.

But this reply misses the target. Even if it is true that content externalism does not entirely undermine the usefulness of general psychological principles of this sort, the fact remains that it forces us to describe certain cases that intuitively are *not* instances of irrationality as being just that - instances of irrationality. For instance, the starting point of Burge's thought experiment is precisely that Bert, who believes that he has arthritis in his thigh, is *not* irrational. The challenge for the externalist is to explain how a rational individual can hold beliefs of this sort (or make obvious reasoning errors), and this challenge can hardly be met by concluding away the starting point, and suggesting that the individual is not, in fact, rational (adding that human beings are less than rational in any case).⁶⁰

Neither Burge's, nor Brown's strategies for reconciling content externalism with the requirement that concepts should account for cognitive role, therefore, hold much promise. This does not settle the issue, but it does show that the prospects are bleak for a content externalist who accepts the requirement.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the current debate over the compatibility of content externalism and self-knowledge is fundamentally misguided. Participants in the debate have failed to keep distinct three different notions of 'knowledge of content' and, as a result, have failed to see that the central issues here are not, after all, epistemological.⁶¹ By posing the challenge in epistemological terms, the incompatibilist has encouraged the reply that there is nothing more to knowledge of one's own occurrent thoughts than what is captured by the cogito-judgments. Once the problem is put in terms of understanding, this reply is no longer available. Even if it is granted that Burge has captured all there

is to knowledge of one's own thoughts, the worry remains that the content externalist fails to give a plausible account of understanding and reasoning.⁶²

¹ Burge 1988. See also Heil 1988.

² For recent contributions see Bilgrami 2003, Brown 2004, Goldberg 2005, Kobes 2003, Sawyer 2002 and Vahid 2003.

³ It is often said that only the social (content) externalist is committed to the assumption of incomplete understanding, but not the physical externalist. (See for instance Sawyer 2003.) However, as I have argued elsewhere, this is mistaken, and content externalism generally relies on the assumption of incomplete understanding (see XXX 2003 and 2004).

⁴For the distinction between foundational semantics and semantic theories (or descriptive semantics) see Stalnaker 1997, pp. 535-536.

⁵ A further complication is how to draw a distinction between internal and external factors. Here I shall have to ignore this complication too, but see Farkas 2003 for a good discussion.

⁶ Some have explicitly defended a version of Millianism in the case of natural kind terms as well. See for instance McKinsey 1987.

⁷ McKinsey 1991. See also Boghossian 1997.

⁸ Burge 1988.

⁹ Ibid. pp. 654-656.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 662.

¹¹ Burge 1996. Reprinted in Ludlow & Martin 1998. Page references are to the reprint.

¹² Ibid. 244.

¹³ Burge's notion of an epistemic entitlement, as Burge himself notes, is broader than the ordinary notion of epistemic justification. We may, he suggests, have an entitlement to certain beliefs even though we lack reasons for them (ibid. p. 241). Although it is not entirely clear how to understand Burge's notion of an entitlement, I shall not discuss it further since the distinction between entitlement and justification will not be of any importance to the discussion below.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 246.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 249.

¹⁶ There have been some attempts to question the suggestion that cogito-judgments are self-verifying. See for instance Gallois 1996, 173. However, as emphasized in Sawyer 2002, such attempts are typically based on a failure to distinguish cogito-judgments from judgments about the propositional attitudes. Burge himself stresses the distinction between what he calls pure cogito-cases and impure ones (where there is a possibility of mistake concerning the attitude in question). For a recent discussion, see Burge 2003.

¹⁷ John Heil makes a related point, although Heil puts it in terms of what is required to have a thought in the first place (Heil 1988, 144). However, the proposal that in order to have the thought that *p* one would need to know the individuation conditions of *p* has even less plausibility than the proposal that in order to *know* that one is thinking that *p* one would need to know the individuation conditions of *p*.

¹⁸ The notion of 'introspective knowledge of comparative content' comes from Falvey & Owens 1994, pp. 109-110. See also Butler 1997, p. 782. For an extensive discussion of why externalism poses a threat to this discriminatory ability, see Brown 2004, pp. 37-59.

¹⁹ Assuming, for the sake of argument, that 'water' has a different meaning and expresses a different concept on the two planets (I question this assumption in XXX 2005) and, moreover, that Oscar retains his old concept allowing him to think both thoughts.

²⁰ As Brown points out, some versions of content externalism also threaten the transparency of *sameness* of content, the idea that if two thoughts have the same content S can realize this a priori (Brown 2004, pp. 161-170). For instance, deferring to his community Rudolf thinks mistakenly that *cilantro* and *coriander* are two distinct concepts. I return to this in section 4.2.

²¹ See for instance Brueckner 1999, 2000 and Falvey & Owens 1994. Falvey and Owens even suggest that this is where the central epistemological interest lies in the debate: "The epistemological interest of externalism lies mainly in the way it highlights the distinction between knowledge of content and knowledge of comparative content..." (ibid. p. 137)

²² See for instance Burge 1988, pp. 654-655, Gallois 1996, p. 181, and Gibbons 1996, pp. 296-297.

²³ Boghossian puts it (on the part of the compatibilist) as follows: "since under normal circumstances the *twater* hypothesis is not a relevant alternative, we ought not to assume...that we could not know our actual thought contents unless we are able to discriminate between them and their various twin counterparts." (Boghossian 1989, p. 158. Reprinted in P. Ludlow & N. Martin 1998. Page references are to the reprint.)

²⁴ Boghossian 1989, p. 159.

²⁵ See for instance Warfield 1992. See also Brown (2004): "this fictional story does nothing to make twin situations relevant for ordinary subjects." (p. 142)

²⁶ Ludlow 1995.

²⁷ Burge emphasizes this difference between the perceptual case and the self-knowledge case. In the case of perception, he writes, one may be mistaken because some counterfeit has been substituted, but in the case of the cogito-judgments there is no possibility of counterfeits: “No abnormal background condition could substitute some other object in such a way as to create a gap between what we think and what we think about” (Burge 1988, p. 659). See also Falvey & Owens 1994, p. 117, and Gibbons 1996, p. 298.

²⁸ Brown 2004, p. 63.

²⁹ Burge's appeal to basic self-knowledge could perhaps be compared with Kant's claim that it must be possible for 'I think' to accompany all my thoughts. Kant stresses that this type of self-knowledge or 'apperception' is merely formal, and to be sharply distinguished from substantial knowledge of one's own inner life. (See for instance "Critique of Pure Reason", B 168-169.)

³⁰ I owe this formulation to Peter Pagin, in conversation.

³¹ This, of course, does not exclude construing grasping a concept as a form of 'knowledge how'.

³² For a discussion of first-person knowledge of language see Barber 2001 and Smith 2001.

³³ Goldberg 2003a.

³⁴ It should be pointed out that Goldberg does not take the lack of first-person authority in such a scenario to threaten basic self-knowledge but on the contrary to provide additional support for the compatibilist position (see *ibid.* p. 72).

³⁵ Sawyer, discussing a related paper by Goldberg, complains that his “focus on linguistic utterances rather than the judgments themselves is less than helpful” (2002, p. 126, fn 11).

³⁶ Burge 1988, p. 662.

³⁷ Jessica Brown emphasizes how Burge separates these two steps. On Burge's view, she writes, "a subject can know that she thinks that p even if she incompletely understands the content p." (Brown 2000, p. 660) I return to Brown below.

³⁸ A particularly clear illustration of this is provided by Burge's response to Davidson's objection that the assumption of partial understanding seriously compromises first person authority (Davidson 1987, p. 448). Burge replies that it is unclear to him why Davidson thinks this and refers to the distinction between understanding a thought and being able to explicate it (Burge 1998, p. 662, fn. 10). The reason Burge is not at all worried by Davidson's remark, clearly, is that he does not believe that partial understanding can undermine the infallibility and justification of cogito-judgments. Because Davidson poses his worry in epistemological terms, Burge dismisses it and appeals to his view on understanding.

³⁹I argue for this claim at some length in XXX 2001, 2003 2004 and 2006.

⁴⁰ Burge writes: "In actual fact, 'arthritis', as used in his community, does not apply to ailments outside the joints. Indeed it fails to do so by a standard, non-technical dictionary definition" (1979, p. 78).

⁴¹ Burge is quite explicit about this and writes: "*if* the thought experiment is to work...one must at some stage find the subject believing (or having some attitude characterized by) a content, despite an incomplete understanding or misapplication. An ordinary empirical error appears not to be sufficient" (Burge 1979, 83).

⁴² It is sometimes suggested that the externalist is in a *better* position to account for this dialectic than the internalist (see for instance Burge 1993). However, this is not so. On the contrary, the externalist is in a *worse* position, since it is unclear (on the

externalist view) why reflecting on one's usage should yield proper explications (given that this usage may be seriously mistaken).

⁴³ Assuming that there is a distinction between conceptual errors and empirical ones. This assumption could of course be questioned, but it is essential to externalism (as argued in XXX 2001, 2003 and 2004).

⁴⁴ For a discussion of externalism and first-order reasoning see Bilgrami 1992, Fodor 1980, Loar 1985, and Segal 2000. Brown 2004 also gives a large number of examples that illustrates these difficulties, pp. 156-182. I discuss this further in XXX 2006.

⁴⁵ Brown 2004, pp. 166-170.

⁴⁶ Brown 2004, 161-166. Brown proposes that this difficulty does not apply to Fregean anti-individualism since it allows for a finer discrimination of thought content than does non-Fregean anti-individualism (ibid. 197-210). However, in XXX 2006, I argue that in the case of general terms there is no room for a Fregean version of anti-individualism (leaving it open whether there is room for such a position in the case of singular terms).

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 247.

⁴⁸ Brown 2000, pp. 665-666. See also XXX 2001b, p. 245.

⁴⁹ Brown 2000, p. 662. As Brown notes, incomplete understanding affects our capacity of critical reasoning in a way that mere false beliefs do not. Critical reasoning requires the ability to assess a belief in the light of other beliefs, and having false beliefs does not pose any obstacle to such assessments (ibid. p. 665).

⁵⁰ Goldberg 2003b, p. 252. Goldberg's distinction between basic self-knowledge and C-self-knowledge, notice, corresponds to Burge's distinction, quoted above, between "'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of basic self-knowledge" and

"knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of being able to explicate them correctly..." (Burge 1988, p. 662.)

⁵¹ For a particularly clear statement of this view, see Millikan 1993.

⁵² This is unsurprising, since it is not clear why one should worry about giving up on self-knowledge if one does not accept the requirement that content should capture cognitive role.

⁵³ Burge 1979, p. 100.

⁵⁴ Goldberg 2002 argues that given a trivial specification of individuals' conceptions, difficulties of this sort can be avoided. For instance, my claim that Bert would hold an incoherent belief (the belief that he has a disease of the joints only in his thigh), presupposes that Bert's conception of arthritis is that of a disease of the joints only and not, simply, that of arthritis. I cannot discuss this proposal here, but it is worth pointing out that Goldberg's strategy of giving trivial characterizations of concepts, presupposes that the belief that arthritis afflicts the joints only is not a conceptual truth, but merely an empirical belief. If this is correct then, obviously, Bert's belief is not incoherent. However, as I argue in XXX (2001a), if it is not a conceptual truth that arthritis afflicts the joints only, Burge's thought experiment fails to go through.

⁵⁵ Brown 2004, pp. 182-192.

⁵⁶ Boghossian 1994.

⁵⁷ Brown 2004, p. 184.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 189.

⁵⁹ For instance the following principle: "If a subject occurrently believes p and occurrently intends to F if p, and if S has no independent reason for not F-ing, then S will intend to F." (Brown 2004, p. 189)

⁶⁰ Brown also proposes a second strategy for dealing with the rationality problem. She suggests that the content externalist can simply appeal to the individual's mistaken beliefs about the *content* of her own thoughts. This proposal, however, faces difficulties similar to those of Burge's suggestion that we can avoid describing Bert as irrational by appealing to the notion of linguistic misinformation. I discuss Brown's proposal in some detail in XXX 2006.

⁶¹ This is not to deny that there are interesting epistemological questions in the offing. For instance, it may be that content externalism poses a difficulty when it comes to first-person knowledge of the *propositional attitudes*. Indeed, an interesting question is whether ICU threatens this knowledge. See for instance Bernecker 2000 and Gibbons 2001.

⁶² Thanks to Lilli Alanen, Bill Brewer, Jessica Brown, Martin Davies, Sanford Goldberg, Kathrin Glüer-Pagin, Sören Häggqvist, Michael McKinsey and Peter Pagin for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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